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ABSTRACT

Reflecting the large role that writing assignments play in teaching and testing, a great quantity of research and published discussion exists which examines issues in designing writing topics for assessments. Because the immediate purpose of an assessment instrument is to measure students' writing proficiency, writing tasks that push students to demonstrate skills that they have not developed may elicit misleading writing samples. In addition, writing topics that do not challenge students to develop and master skills may not enhance their performance. Several publications offer guidelines for help in designing assignments for instruction in writing, including Erika Lindemann's "A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers," and Richard Larson's "Writing in the Academic and Professional Disciplines." Research has addressed the following questions on designing topics: (1) what kinds of cognitive tasks should students be asked to perform; (2) on what subjects should the prompts be written; (3) how specific should the rhetorical contexts of the questions be; and (4) how should the test topic be structured. Findings showed that students did better with textbook topics than with their own topics, humorous responses to the topics received higher evaluations, and few assignments specified audience, context purpose, or style. (Twenty-nine references are appended.) (MM)

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Designing Effective Writing Assignments: What Do We Know?

In the twenty-five years I have been teaching composition, I have, I recently calculated, collected nearly 32,000 pieces of writing elicited from around 1300 writing assignments. Neither of those figures reflects journal assignments, prewriting exercises, or placement and exemption essays written on assignments I have designed. I offer you the 32,000 and 1300 to impress you, not with how busy I have been, but with how great a part writing assignments play in our teaching and testing. In fact, William Irmscher has said that "Assigning topics for writing is one of the most important things a composition teacher does" (69).

Like me, you have on some occasion wondered, I am sure, why some assignments have produced good pieces of writing and others have not. Why, for example, the same assignment has elicited good writing from your 8:00 o'clock students, but not from your 2:00 o'clock students. Why, on a larger scale, students writing a sample for a placement exam choose Topic A over Topic B and C three to one. Why women write more effective essays on Topic A than men do. Or why broad topics may produce more effective writing than those with well-defined rhetorical specifications.

We should, I think, be encouraged by the published discussions about writing assignments for the classroom and by the amount and scope of the recent research examining issues in designing writing topics for assessments.

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I do not mean, when I say recent research, that the writing topic has been ignored. Certainly, in the '60's and '70's we read of a concern about writing assignments. In 1963, for example, James Moffett said in Teaching the Universe of Discourse, "Ideally, a student would write because he was intent on saying something for real reasons of this own and because he wanted to get certain effects on a definite audience. He would write only authentic kinds of discourse such as exist outside of school" (193). Moffett also recommended that one paper be adapted into another, each requiring a lot of rewriting based on suggestions from other students. And he made a strong case for our distinguishing between writing about what might or should happen and writing about what has already happened.

And in a 1967 The Leaflet article, reprinted in Tate and Corbett's The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook (1981), Richard Larson criticized the literature's focus on annotating and evaluating themes to the neglect of the theme assignment itself. Larson proposed that a teacher "plan every theme assignment with care before presenting it to his students; that as a part of this planning, [he] identify the activities and operations of mind in which the student must engage if he is to cope with the assignment; and that he . . . see each assignment, if possible, as part of a truly sequential course in composition" (213). Larson offered an 11-step procedure for designing composition assignments, recommending, for example, that we consider what the student will need to know in order to perform well on the assignment.

In his 1968 A Writer Teaches Writing, Donald Murray described the most effective assignment as one that encourages students to have an informed opinion he can develop and document within reasonable limitations. "The good assignment," he said, "is usually short, offers the writer a chance to solve a writing problem which is bothering him and is on a subject which is important to the writer" (135).

Engfish, the empty, bloated language we too frequently see in compositions, Ken Macrorie said in 1970, is the result of teachers' demands that students adhere to traditional

standards, write on preconceived topics, and give them what they want. In Telling Writing (1970), he argued that students should choose their own subjects so that their voices come through to the reader, while in Teaching Expository Writing (1979), William Irmsher said, "... choice [of topic] is certainly good [but] limitless choice ... usually proves self-defeating" (72). (Other composition theorists and practitioners, notably Donald Murray, Donald Graves, and Peter Elbow have encouraged us to turn topic choice over to our students.)

In her classic 1971 study, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Janet Emig called our attention to the specifiable dimensions of the teacher-initiated assignment, suggesting, for instance, that the context in which an assignment occurs may affect the assignment. She pointed out that internal aspects of the assignment--the purpose, audience, mode, deadline, length, linguisitic formulation of the assignment, the conventions, and the treatment of the written outcome--bear upon the student's writing process and product. Furthermore, she concluded, the student's response to the assignment is affected by her ability to comprehend, be motivated by, and perform her task.

To skip to the '80's: In "Defining and Assessing Competence in Writing" (1981), Lee Odell wrote that when we assess writing competence, we need to provide students with writing assignments that demonstrate their ability to discover what they want to say and to choose the appropriate language, sentence structure, organization, and information to achieve a desired purpose with a given audience.

In the past five years, we have seen and heard discussions about how to implement the suggestions of the discourse theorists I have mentioned. Many of the discussions in our journals and newsletters describe writing assignments for instruction, and we have learned much about how to design writing topics from reports of large-scale assessment studies. We have also learned that designing a prompt for a writing assessment and designing one for instruction in the classroom present different challenges. For instance, in the

frequently-cited five-part study conducted by the Bay Area Writing Project under the direction of Leo Ruth--Properties of Writing Tasks: A Study of Alternative Procedures for Holistic Writing Assessment (1982)--Ruth contrasts designing prompts for tests with those designed for classroom use. He cites differences between population (class members vs. assembled students), leader (teacher vs. proctor), the negotiable/autonomous status of the assignment text, interaction, the interpersonal and depersonalized aspect of the writing process, expectations (known vs. partly explicit), and evaluation (flexible vs. standard).

In Teaching and Assessing Writing (1985), Edward White notes that some kinds of topics that would not be useable on a large-scale writing test may be appropriate in class. In a test situation, he says, "the strict demand for validity--that is, that the responses to the question accurately reflect the writing ability of the students--may actually conflict with a teacher's need to stretch the abilities of some students. As students reach for new skills, they often will struggle or even fail on early drafts" (102).

Generally, then, because the immediate purpose of an assessment instrument is to measure students' writing proficiency, not to alter it, writing tasks that push students to demonstrate, in a timed examination situation, skills that they have not developed may elicit misleading writing samples. Conversely, classroom writing topics that do not challenge students to develop and master skills may not enhance their performance.

In designing class assignments, White recommends that we use the same rigor that test designers apply. Classroom teachers have, he says, a built-in field testing situation, since we can revise our assignments based on students' comments about the clarity, interest, or validity of the topics.

Two sources of tested writing assignments are Utah State University's Exercise Exchange: A Journal for Teachers of English in High Schools and Colleges and NCTE's Notes Plus: A Quarterly of Practical Teaching Ideas. And, of course, the Staffroom Interchange section of College Composition and Communication sometimes offers rationales for

successful writing assignments, such as James E. Middleton and John Reiff's "A 'Student-Based' Approach to Writing Assignments," in the May 1985 issue. Concerned because instructors frequently don't consider what students must do to develop a written response, Middleton and Reiff argue that "every instructor's writing assignments must reflect concern for the students' thinking and composing tasks in addition to reflecting the instructor's attention to teaching course content and evaluating a student's learning" (232).

And there are short publications, like Dixie Gibbs Dellinger's National Writing Project Out of the Heart: How to Design Writing Assignments for High School Courses (1982), based on Moffett's work. Dellinger describes a writing sequence that helps students write from the heart and the head at the same time, a writing course that moves from creative to expository writing, sequencing assignments so that the writer increasingly distances herself from her subject.

Fortunately, we also have guidelines we can turn to for help in designing assignments for instruction in writing, only two of which I will briefly discuss here. In A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers (1982), Erika Lindemann says,

> Since students learn to write by writing, our responsibility is to control and vary the rhetorical demands of writing tasks to give students practice in adjusting relationships among writer, reader, and subject, manipulating more and more complex variables. However, most writing assignments . . . leave too many variables to chance and guesswork. They don't provide enough information to help students define rich rhetorical problems. Instead, they present students with a 'paper-writing problem,' a meaningless exercise in jumping hurdles for a grade (203).

Lindemann recommends that in each assignment we account for the following variables: the students' interest in and understanding of the subject; the purpose or aim of the composition; the audience (which needn't be the teacher); a role for the student to take with respect to the subject and audience; the form of discourse (which needn't always be an

essay).

Furthermore, she offers A Heuristic for Designing Writing Assignments, which expands upon these questions: What do I want the students to do? How do I want them to do the assignment? For whom are they writing? When will the students do the assignment? and What will I do with the assignment?

A second source of help in creating writing assignments is Richard Larson's pamphlet Writing in the Academic and Professional Discipines (1983), published by Herbert Lehman College. Larson and his assistants offer nine questions to consider in designing writing assignments. For instance, as he suggested in his 1967 article mentioned earlier, we should ask of an assignment, "Is the task that the students must accomplish clearly defined? That is, can the student see exactly what task he or she is called upon to perform in writing" (9)?

Results of modest studies are also being reported to help us improve our writing assignments. One such study was reported by Libby Jones of University of Tennessee-Knoxville at the 4 C's in 1983. Jones studied 166 narratives and 139 cause-and-effect essays from eight freshman composition classes, interviewing the instructors to establish variables in assignment sources, length, method of presentations, extent of choice provided, amount and kind of class discussion, and teacher evaluation and responses, and studying teachers' evaluations and responses to measure the effectiveness of the essays. She learned that in overall effectiveness, the narrative assignment was less successful than the cause-and effect assignment. She speculated on the reasons: progressive leniency in grading, writing improvement from weeks two to eight, greater ease with the expository assignment than with the expressive discourse, and possible greater choice provided by the assignment itself. In both assignments, a range of specific topics (from five to forty-eight) was offered, some from texts, some from teachers, some from students. Jones concluded that, while allowing greater choice of topics may do no harm, perhaps students would benefit from concentrating on developing a few topics rather than

from choosing among many.

Here are several other findings: Students did better with textbook topics than with their own. Humorous responses to the topics got higher evaluations. And, despite admonitions from leading composition theorists, few assignments specified audience, context, purpose, or style. The most common requirement in the assignment was the mode. The narrow, trivial, and underdeveloped essays Jones read suggested to her that "assigning and enforcing the modes as ends rather than means may be robbing our students of profundity and flexibility in their writing."

Large-scale assessments also can provide insights into topic design. As more and more states move toward a dependence on writing samples to determine students' proficiency in writing and as colleges increasingly turn to writing samples to place their students in composition classes, our need to know how to develop stimuli for those tests becomes more urgent. In the reports of studies of large-scale assesments questions recur either explicitly or implicitly in relation to the development of writing prompts. Four such questions are What kinds of cognitive and writing tasks should students be asked to perform? On what subjects should the prompts be written? How specific should the rhetorical contexts of the questions be? How should the test topic be structured?

To give you a sense of the scope of the research on designing topics, I will describe several studies that address those questions.

What kinds of cognitive tasks should students be asked to perform? Karen Greenberg, in her frequently-cited report, The Effects of Variations in Essay Questions on the Writing Performance of CUNY Freshman (1981), describes a study that tested the hypothesis that interpretive questions--i.e., questions that follow the format of a brief text, then "Do you agree or disagree?--which offered students a variety of options for structuring answers--in other words, had low cognitive demands--and which asked students for their personal experiences, would improve the quality of students' written responses to the questions. She

found that was not the case: students' overall writing quality, measured holistically, was not significantly affected by the type of essay question to which they responded. Nor did rhetorical, syntactic or lexical performance differ.

On what subjects should the prompts be written? In his review of the literature on the effects of essay topics on student writing, James Hoetker (1982) concluded that, no matter what else we demand of a topic, it must be clear and it must not demand information, awareness, or special skill that is not likely to be shared by everyone in the population being examined.

And in an unpublished manuscript, Sybil Carlson (1985) describes the process Educational Testing Service researchers used to design writing topics for a survey of academic tasks. First, as Hoetker mentioned, the content of the topics must be equally accessible to the variety of students who would be responding to it. Second, the terminology in the writing test should be free of vocabulary and concepts that require specialized knowledge for an effective response to the topic. Third, topics should diminish the possibility that emotional responses will be evoked by the subject matter or by the hidden agenda of the task. Fourth, the subjects of the tasks need to be sufficiently compelling to the writers and, eventually, to the readers of the writing samples.

How specific should the rhetorical contexts of the questions be? In "Rhetorical Specification in Essay Examination Topics," in the February 1983 issue of College English, Gordon Brossell reports on one aspect of a large-scale study commissioned by the Florida Department of Education. Brossell describes the test procedure, which included three versions of six essay topics, each of the three versions providing the students with varying amounts of information about the rhetorical contexts. He discovered that essay topics did not themselves affect the quality of student writing; the informational level had a discernible effect on student essays; length and scores of essays were significantly correlated; essays with the most rhetorical specifications scored lower and were shorter; essays with the

medium rhetorical specifications scored highest and were longer; essays with medium rhetorical specification and written on the subject of violence in the schools scored the highest and were the longest, possibly, Brossell suggests, because of " a particularly congenial match between this topic in this format and the test conditions and examinees in this study" 172).

Of course, these findings bring into question the received wisdom that full rhetorical specifications will more likely elicit the best writing students can produce.

How should the test topic be structured? Addressing a relatively neglected aspect of designing topics--the way a topic is framed or structured--William Smith, Jr., and his associates describe in Written Communication (1985) a study "designed to examine directly whether (and how) the topic structures typically used by colleges affect writing" (74). The researchers designed three topic structures, similar in what they required the subjects to do, but varying in amount of material the subjects were given to read. The essays were scored holistically and analyzed for fluency, total error, and error ratio. Smith et al. conclude that the structure of the topic made a difference in quality, fluency, and total error, but not in error ratio and that in designing writing topics for placement tests, a testmaker should first decide which students are to be identified, since each topic structure in the study distinguished low, average, and high ability students differently.

Most of us composition teachers would, I think, agree with Karen Greenberg's assessment in "Some Relationships Between Writing Assignments and Students' Writing Performance" (1982): "Most of us assume that differences in the quality of our students' writing occur as a result of the many varying factors attending our students' encounters with particular assignments in particular settings" (7). There are, Greenberg reminds us, "no simple answers . . . to the question of what makes an effective writing assignment" (12). And our experiences with writing assignments for instructional use and for collecting writing samples have, of course, raised questions other than those I have dealt cursorily

with here. While we need studies that apply to the design of classroom writing assignments what we have learned from the recent spate of studies of large-scale assessment, we need to recognize that sources are available to help answer some of our questions about topics for teaching and testing writing.

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